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ABSTRACT

Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, launched a collaborative partnership effort with four public school districts in an effort to refine existing teacher education methods and explore alternative methods. Student teachers were called "teacher interns," which generated an increased professional attitude from both the "interns" themselves and public school students. Each intern was placed with both an upper and lower grade level teacher. Students were placed in cohort groups at the school site, to create a supportive learning environment and reduce interns' feelings of isolation. Each cohort group met weekly to discuss topics of the interns' choice. Cohort group members noted the value of having a support group of peers, and university supervisors felt that cohorts grew professionally as a result of the meetings. To enhance communication between the university and the districts, articulation sessions were scheduled each semester, involving various combinations of university faculty, school personnel, and interns. Suggestions offered at these sessions helped to improve the teacher education program and school district procedures. A pre-internship orientation session was also developed, where interns met with administrators and cooperating teachers; these sessions eased the anxiety that interns experience before they actually begin their internships. (JDD)

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Cohort Placement of Teacher Interns in Public Schools

A Presentation to the

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by

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Cohort Placement of Teacher Interns in Public Schools

According to Kathryn S. Whitaker and Monte C. Moses in The Restructuring Handbook: A Guide to School Revitalization, "Higher education institutions in this country are in a position to play an important role in offering solutions to education problems. They are more able to design innovative approaches to teaching and learning than public schools because of their capacity to generate and conduct research" (p. 96).

While Whitaker and Moses chide higher education institutions for being slow to develop collaborative efforts with public schools, they warn universities that if they are to be key players in the restructuring of education, they must work directly with the public schools. They state, "Universities must examine their own teacher and administrator preparation programs to determine whether they provide prospective teachers and administrators with the resources they need to work successfully in restructured schools" (p. 100). The authors feel that if higher education is to be of help, University folks and programs must model the kinds of changes that should occur in public schools. The recent report on higher education released from the Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993) indicates that....institutional creativity, not micromanagement, is the essential precondition to change.

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP

Henderson State University (HSU) in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, has launched a collaborative partnership effort with four public school districts in the HSU service area in an effort to explore and

refine alternative and existing methods for training teacher educators. Through consistent, continuous interaction with public school administrators, cooperating teachers, and teacher interns, HSU has acquired information that will aid in clarifying and redesigning its teacher education program.

In 1992, HSU received a grant from the Arkansas Department of Higher Education that allowed for the formation of a Professional Development Alliance with the Arkadelphia and Lakeside School Districts. Formation of the Alliance allowed the partners to discuss, explore, and implement exemplary strategies to create a hallmark teacher training model. In 1993, HSU received funding for a Phase II grant to continue the work begun in Phase I and to expand the Alliance to include the Bryant and Malvern School Districts.

Early discussions with University and public school personnel questioned several current practices and recommendations for immediate changes were considered - including the placement of student teachers with one cooperating teacher. One such recommendation included the change of the term "student teacher" to "teacher intern." Student teachers and cooperating teachers felt this change would indicate an increased professional attitude from both the "interns" and public school students. Public school student response was very positive. The new title generated more respect and confidence from all stakeholders, including the interns themselves. Since the interns are certified in multiple grade levels, it was decided during Phase I to have split assignments

with interns dividing the training semester between upper and lower grade level sites. In addition, the effectiveness of singular placements of interns, or those involving one intern assigned to one public school district, was questioned. An economic concern existed since the University supervisory process for singular placements was costly. In addition, singularly placed interns informally reported that they felt isolated and lacked peer support. Students placed in districts with three or more interns informally reported access to peer reflective practices and a better understanding of professional relationships including idea networking.

COHORT PLACEMENTS

HSU examined several programs, including the Danforth Foundation's Program for the Preparation of School Principals, who claimed improved communication through the successful incorporation of cohort groups. Due to the small class size of the University, HSU interns enter the internship semester with at least a minimal relationship with their colleagues. However, the formal assignment to a specific cohort group within the public school internship site could allow for a greater understanding of past experiences and talents, as well as for a sharing of concerns and successes throughout the internship. Believing that assigning interns to cohort groups would create a supportive learning environment where trust, openness, and mutual respect are valued (Barnett, p. 400), HSU discontinued the practice of singular placements and began to require the formation of cohort groups within the grant sites.

At HSU, cohort placement involves assigning no fewer that three teacher interns to a given public school teacher training site. The interns within the grant sites are formally assigned to a cohort group. Each group meets weekly during non-instructional hours at a time and place determined by group members. A group leader is selected by the cohorts to facilitate the meetings with the option of choosing one leader to serve the entire internship or rotating the leadership responsibility among members.

A simple "Cohort Group Reflection Form" (see Attachment A) is the only documentation required by the University. On the form, the group leader records: (1) "What was discussed?" (2) "What can the school district/University do to better meet your needs and interests?" (3) "What do you need to do in order to make the internship experience more valuable?" (4) "List three words to describe your group's feelings." There are no requirements or restrictions placed on discussion topics or length of meetings.

By allowing the cohort group to determine topics for discussion, students are empowered to take responsibility. This empowerment has been found to be a highly motivating factor during students' involvement in cohort groups (Hill, 1992).

Because each group determines the time and location of meetings, a variety of arrangements have occurred. One group chose to meet at a local fast food restaurant for breakfast once a week. Other choices have included: meeting for lunch in the school cafeteria, meeting after school in the teachers' lounge, and meeting in the centrally located home of one of the interns on

Friday evenings. Regardless of the meeting arrangements, the outcomes of cohort meetings have been consistent. The camaraderie that has evolved between group members has contributed positively to their final training semester or internship. Group members share ideas and resources. They provide support for one another. One grant site principal observed that the cohort meetings provide interns quality "lounge time." He said, "Cohort meetings give the interns an opportunity to have professional interaction with peers without intimidation."

If the cohort group discussion subject is confidential in nature, the group leader simply records "confidential" in response to "What was discussed?". It is the group leader's responsibility to return the completed forms to the University when convenient but before the end of the semester.

Cohort group members have also noted the value of having a support group of peers in which to confide. In a formal Likert Scale Survey of the Effectiveness of the HSU Professional Development Alliance, eighty-three percent of the interns responding reported that the cohort groups served as a support force for interns with seventy-eight percent utilizing the group meetings as a vehicle for communication. In addition to the benefits for interns, the University and public school faculty have also found the cohort meetings helpful. Eighty-eight percent of the University administration and supervisors responding felt that the cohorts grew professionally as a result of cohort group meetings. Public school administrators agree and they, as well as

University personnel, were are able to communicate efficiently by utilizing cohort meetings to relate generic information and to distribute materials.

Some of the most common adjectives used to describe interns' feelings during the early days of the internship are nervous, tired, anxious, and excited. Within two or three weeks, words such as calmer, enthusiastic, prepared, and tougher appear on the Cohort Group Reflection Forms. The two most commonly recorded words during the final cohort group meetings are sad and excited. Although teacher interns are often reluctant to leave their internship assignments, they were inevitably enthusiastic about the completion of their teacher training program and the prospect of awaiting opportunities to use their newly acquired skills in their own classrooms.

Steven Northcutt, a former teacher intern and recent HSU graduate summarized the benefits of the cohort group meetings. "We had these cohort meetings and our group decided the best time to meet was between 7:00 and 7:15 in the morning. It was very, very low-key--we didn't feel any pressure. The people I was with were tremendous. We were really able to talk to each other and ask each other 'How do you handle this situation?' 'What do you do here?' On the bottom of the Cohort Reflection Form it asks for three words to describe the feelings of this group--we really enjoyed doing that. Some of our feelings were different. I just can't say enough about cohort groups."

ARTICULATION SESSIONS

With quality communication as a top grant priority, the University began the practice of conducting articulation sessions in the four grant public school districts. Three articulation sessions were scheduled per semester with the University and District jointly deciding dates and times. In all sessions, everyone talked. The agenda was simple. It included two questions: "What's working?" and "What can HSU/District do to better meet the needs of cooperating teachers/interns?" Each attendee responded to each question separately with positive comments given first. A "District Articulation Form" (see Attachment B) was provided to each attendee on which these two questions are recorded. Participants were encouraged to mail additional or confidential responses to the Grant Facilitator. The first session involved only University and public school administrators. Scheduled during the first weeks of the semester internship, it was usually held in the central administrative offices of the individual districts. The School of Education Dean, department chairs, grant personnel, and school district administrators attended. At this first meeting, the administrators discussed what was successful about the internship program and offered suggestions for improvements at the University and in the public school training site. In answer to "What's working?" one superintendent remarked, "Having a Dean of a University come to my District and ask me 'What's working?'"

The second articulation session was a two-part dialogue. HSU

faculty met first with teacher interns. After the session, the interns returned to the classroom and the cooperating teachers joined the HSU representatives for the same dialogue. Public school administrators were encouraged to attend the second session.

While it is hoped that both cooperating teachers would attend this session, often only one cooperating teacher was able to attend. In that case, those attending were encouraged to discuss the meeting with and provide a copy of the District Articulation Form to cooperating teachers who were unable to attend.

The meeting climate was informal with seating arranged in a circle to assure everyone having equal status. The Facilitator had everyone state name and position. General rules regarding safe environment were explained. No name tags or placecards are used at the articulation meetings so that recorded statements would be remembered in general and not as individual concerns. The Facilitator reminded the group that no names were to be used in the discussion. However, often this does happen and, if so, the names were deleted in the meeting records.

The third and final articulation session of the semester involved all stakeholders--University faculty, public school administrators, cooperating teachers, and teacher interns--coming together for a joint articulation session utilizing the same two questions and District Articulation Form. The public school district decided the format for this final meeting. One school district, for example, provided one-half day substitutes for both first and second site cooperating teachers, allowing the teachers

and interns to leave the school grounds for a lunch "on their own" with the cooperating teachers treating the interns. In another district, the interns, cooperating teachers, administrators, and University personnel met at a local restaurant after school, holding the final two hour articulation session before an optional dinner.

In the formal Likert Scale Survey, the majority of those responding believed that personal suggestions offered at the articulation sessions helped to improve the HSU Teacher Education Program or District procedures. While most respondents stated that the format of the sessions invited productivity, many indicated that more sessions were needed. Ninety-five percent of those responding stated that they felt free to discuss feelings at the individual and joint sessions without fear of reprisal.

In the three articulation sessions, all responses were recorded. A detailed summary of all verbal statements was compiled and disseminated to all stakeholders in the participating public schools and University. From these recorded responses, recommendations for constructive changes are made to the Grant Director who is also the Dean of the HSU School of Education. Such changes were piloted within the grant sites prior to submitting recommendations to the Teacher Education Policy Council and the Field Experience Advisory Council.

ORIENTATION SESSIONS

One recommendation involved a pre-internship orientation session to begin the first day of school or first day returning

after Christmas. The rationale for this session was for the intern to experience the beginning of the school year or semester. Grant site interns beginning in the Spring 1994 semester were given the opportunity to report to their sites January 3-7 for the orientation session. A suggested itinerary was prepared for the grant sites with each District having autonomy to make needed individual changes. The Districts used the first day for "Meeting Administrators" with the interns receiving school and student handbooks as well as valuable information about teacher parking, lunch, dress code, and other necessary details from an assistant superintendent and/or building principals, media specialists, and other District personnel. The Districts' superintendents had lunch with the interns and answered a multitude of questions. The second and third days were spent with the first site cooperating teacher with the final two days involving the same activities with the second site cooperating teacher. Seventy-two percent of interns responding to the Survey felt the five-day orientation session should be integrated into the internship semester in all contract schools. Eighty-three percent of the interns stated that the orientation session served as a vehicle to ease their anxiety level.

PUBLIC SCHOOL COLLABORATION

Jim Bledsoe, Principal of Lakeside Primary School, Lakeside School District, has been a central figure in the new program design. He says, "I'm excited as a public school administrator because when I went through the block 20 something years ago, it

was always the same. You went out and did your 6 or 7 weeks and that was it. I'm excited because I can see changes in working with Henderson. They're listening to what we're saying. They're listening to our ideas. Through continued collaborative efforts with the public schools and interns, the University expects the cohort group and articulation meeting procedures to be replicated outside the grant sites. Stakeholders agree that such practices may contribute significantly to the redesign of teacher training strategies.

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